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“Let Us Care for Everyone’s Home”: The Catholic Church’s Role in Keeping Gold Mining out of El Salvador

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Executive Summary

El Salvador's refusal to allow industrial gold mining within its borders sets it apart from most other Latin American countries. Since 2007, three successive presidents from opposing parties have maintained a de facto moratorium that prevents all mining firms – international and Salvadoran, public and private – from accessing El Salvador's estimated 1.4 million ounces of gold deposits. A majority of Salvadoran citizens and political leaders alike are opposed to mining, citing the country's environmental degradation, population density, and limited water resources. Yet opposition to industrial gold mining has not always been the majority position in El Salvador. As recently as the early 2000s, the Salvadoran government, with support from international donors and creditors, pursued metals mining as an opportunity for economic growth. The story of how El Salvador diverged from this extractivist path is multi-faceted. A key element has been the strategic involvement of the Salvadoran Catholic Church. This working paper explores the Church's influence on the Salvadoran government's decision to suspend all metals mining. The analysis examines the theological and practical motivations for the Church's stance on mining. It also describes the strategic actions taken by the Church to promote its position. Ultimately, the involvement of the Catholic Church served to strengthen the grassroots anti-mining movement, to shape the public debate, and to sway the electorate, which proved decisive in the suspension of all industrial metals mining in this country.

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Introduction

There is no industrial gold mining in El Salvador. This is not because the country lacks gold deposits which, in fact, are plentiful across its northern territory. Instead, it is because since 2007 three successive presidents from opposing political parties have maintained a “permit freeze” (Cabrera Díaz, 2009),¹ suspending all corporate metals mining within the nation’s borders.² According to a 2015 José Simeón Cañas Central American University (UCA) opinion poll, a majority of residents of territory in El Salvador with the potential for mining expressed “total disagreement with metals mining” (IUDOP 2015). Opposition to mining goes beyond directly affected communities and encompasses a wide range of Salvadoran stakeholders, including former Marxist guerillas, rural ranchers, civil servants, members of the domestic private sector, elected officials from both major parties, and religious leaders.

Yet in the early 2000s, this across-the-board societal support was neither obvious nor inevitable. Even as a community-based opposition movement began to come together, the national government stood behind the pro-mining mandate of its existing mining law, further revising regulations to attract foreign mining firms. With the steady rise of gold prices and technological advancements that would allow extraction in previously inaccessible territory, the mining industry was ready to expand in El Salvador, promising much needed income, employment, and economic growth. As a result, a decade following the end of El Salvador’s brutal civil war (1980-1992) and facing entrenched economic stagnation, El Salvador was poised to jump on the metals mining bandwagon. The story of how El Salvador diverged from this extractivist path is multi-faceted. An important element has been the strategic involvement of the Catholic Church.

On May 6, 2007 at the weekly press conference held after Sunday mass at El Salvador’s National Cathedral, Archbishop Fernando Sáenz Lacalle announced that the Catholic leadership of El Salvador was unanimously opposed to metals mining in their small nation. His message was brief and carefully worded, read directly from a letter that each of the country’s eleven Bishops had signed. Widely known now by its subtitle “*Cuidemos la Casa de Todos*” (Let Us Care for Everyone’s Home), the Conference of Catholic Bishops’ “open letter” laid out a pastoral vision of why metals mining should be forbidden in El Salvador (CEDES, 2007). Arguing that metallic mining’s risk of contamination and harm to “all of our home” outweighed any potential economic benefits, the Bishops Conference concluded simply: “no material advantage can compare with the value of human life” (CEDES, 2007).

In 2015, that call has been heard again. It has been echoed by Pope Francis’

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¹ “Permit freeze” and “industry freeze” are terms used in the English-language media for El Salvador’s executive branch mining industry suspension.

² Unregulated artisanal mining by individuals still takes places in some areas of the country.

An analogous theme runs through both the encyclical and the Salvadoran Bishops' pastoral letter: the faith-based responsibility for all people to care for God's creation, which encompasses the earth and its natural resources.

monumental 2015 encyclical³ on climate change, *Laudato Si'*⁴ (Praise Be to You), which carries the oft-quoted subtitle, "On Care for our Common Home" (*Cuidemos la Casa Común*). In the encyclical, the Pope issued an "urgent challenge to protect our common home...to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development" (Francis, 2015). An analogous theme runs through both the encyclical and the Salvadoran Bishops' pastoral letter: the faith-based responsibility for all people to care for God's creation, which encompasses the earth and its natural resources.

The Salvadoran Bishops' pronouncement in 2007 did not, of course, provoke the global response elicited by the Pope's encyclical. The letter addressed a narrow audience, the Salvadoran populace and government, and a single issue, metals mining's negative consequences for El Salvador. "Our home" in this context referred specifically to the national territory of El Salvador. In the words of the Bishops, "Our small country is the space where our God Creator has given us life. It is the portion of the world that He has entrusted to us so that we care for and use it according to his will." They quoted the words of Genesis 1:28, "fill the earth and subdue it" (CEDES, 2007). They continued:

But this blessed land that we love dearly, has suffered a growing and merciless deterioration. We are all responsible for conserving and defending the environment because it is 'the home for us all,' for us now and for future generations.

Pope Francis, too, cited Genesis 1:28 in *Laudato Si'*, presenting an interpretation anticipated by the Salvadoran Bishops that challenges the understanding that God's granting man "dominion" over the earth encourages "the unbridled exploitation of nature." Instead, the encyclical argues humans have the duty to fulfill "a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature" (Francis, 2015).

By rooting the responsibility to defend and protect the natural environment in the biblical duty to care for God's creation, named "home" in both these texts, *Cuidemos la Casa de Todos* and *Laudato Si'* contribute to a growing body of Catholic Social Teaching⁵ on the environment. This relatively new, but still "biblically based vision of humanity integrated with its habitat, the biotic community, and the Earth" (Hart, 2004), has provided theological entry-points into policy debates about humanity's

³ Encyclicals are papal letters addressed to Roman Catholic Church bishops with messages meant to guide Catholics' future actions.

⁴ According to JPIC-El Salvador (2015), the Salvadoran Catholic Church does not claim that its earlier pastoral messages on mining and the environment directly influenced the Pope's encyclical. Yet following its release the Archbishop publically emphasized the common principles, asserting, "We are of the same mind as the Pope, as he says in his encyclical."

⁵ According to Himes (2001), Catholic Social Teaching can be understood "as an effort by the pastoral teachers of the church to articulate what the broader social tradition means in the era of modern economics, politics, and culture."

consumption and development of the natural environment.

Considering the global reach of the papal encyclical whose ultimate impact is yet to be determined, why is the Salvadoran Bishops' 2007 pastoral letter noteworthy? When Archbishop Sáenz Lacalle delivered this pronouncement, almost a decade before Pope Francis' encyclical, the Salvadoran Catholic Church hierarchy became the first to unanimously prioritize protecting their country's environment over potential economic gain. Individual Catholic leaders, in various countries, had utilized Catholic doctrine and taken significant personal risks to oppose the mining industry. In Latin America in particular, other national Bishops Conferences had taken up the issues of mining and extractivism. They presented a range of viewpoints, such as calling for the banishment of certain techniques like open-pit mining (i.e. Guatemala) or encouraging the government to consider mining's dangers without upsetting the industry's economic contributions (i.e. Colombia). Yet, the Salvadoran Church stands out because it was the first to unanimously entreat its government to permanently put an end to the activities of an entire industry.

Today, Catholics make up just half of the Salvadoran population (Spalding, 2014).⁶ Yet the Church remains a formidable and influential actor across Salvadoran society, owing to its unique status as the only constitutionally recognized religious institution in El Salvador (Fox, 2008).⁷ According to a Central American University survey measuring institutional trust among citizens, the Salvadoran Catholic Church consistently received the highest score (e.g., 41% in 2008 and 47% in 2009).⁸ As Erica Dahl-Bredine of El Salvador's branch of Catholic Relief Services explained, "People in the national government have said they are following the Catholic Church's lead on this" (Eulich, 2008).

The 2007 Bishops Conference pronouncement was the highest profile among a series of Salvadoran Church actions and positions that unequivocally opposed metals mining on Salvadoran territory. This working paper explores the Church's influence on the Salvadoran government's decision to suspend all metals mining. Building upon existing scholarship on Salvadoran resistance to mining (Broad and Cavanagh, 2011, 2015; Spalding, 2013, 2014), and drawing upon original fieldwork conducted in El Salvador over the course of three years (2013-2015), this analysis examines the theological and practical motivations for the Church's stance on mining. It also describes the strategic actions taken by the Church to promote its position. Crucially, the involvement of the Catholic Church served to strengthen the community-based movement, shaped the public debate, and swayed the electorate, which proved decisive in the suspension of all industrial metals mining.

⁶ In 2007, the year of the pronouncement, 52% of Salvadorans identified themselves as Catholic, 29.5% as Protestant, and 17% as having no religious affiliation.

⁷ Article 26 of the Salvadoran Constitution explicitly recognizes the Catholic Church, providing it with unique legal status.

⁸ This contrasts with the popular trust scores for other institutions, such as the private sector (7%), political parties (6.5%), and the national legislature (6.5%).

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The Catholic Church, Popular Politics in El Salvador, and Environmental Theology

The Catholic Church in Latin America cannot be understood as monolithic. This is true for the Salvadoran Catholic Church. Just as the country is characterized by deep divisions between Right and Left, rich and poor, capital-dwellers and the rest of the country, the Salvadoran Catholic Church exhibits this polarization. Institutional leadership encompasses divergent factions, from those that represent conservative or traditional interpretations of the Catholic faith to those that preach a progressive pro-poor understanding influenced by Liberation Theology (Betances, 2007). Daniel Levine described this phenomenon in his work on popular Catholicism in Latin America:

For centuries, religion stood as a bulwark for conservatism in this part of the world, and the Catholic Church remained firmly allied with elites opposed to change in the established order of things generally. Church leaders particularly set themselves against popular activism and protest of any kind. When protest came under Catholic banners, matters remained most under firm elite control and direction. But over the last few decades, significant elements in the Catholic Church have moved to the active promotion of change, empowering and legitimating popular protest all across the region (Levine, 1992).

The existence of both reformist and traditional doctrinal currents underlies intra-church divisions and conflicts. Levine's language choice of "elements" illustrates the fragmentary nature of reformist influences within the Church hierarchy.

El Salvador's Catholic Church has long housed such internal ideological divides between its progressive and traditional or conservative wings. While the Vatican and Salvadoran Bishops Conference provide overarching guidance, individual bishops can act with a degree of independence. In this context, even though the Archbishop of San Salvador presides over the Bishops Conference and sets the ideological tone of the national Church, there can be significant discord within the highest echelons of the Salvadoran Church. It is not uncommon for individual provincial dioceses and their component parishes to preach messages distinct from those of the country's highest religious body and the archbishopric. This creates a division between those clergy who understand their mission as primarily spiritual, to be pursued via prayer and not through political intervention, and those who adopt a hands-on approach that includes efforts to apply key church doctrine and beliefs in public policy debates (Dudley, 2013).

The tenure of El Salvador's renowned and recently beatified Archbishop of San Salvador, the assassinated Monsignor Óscar Romero, offers an example. Romero served as El Salvador's archbishop from 1977 to 1980, as the country moved toward civil war. His theological orientation evolved while presiding over the Salvadoran

archbishopric to incorporate facets of Liberation Theology. Romero is celebrated for utilizing his authority within the Church to preach against the government's unjust and oppressive actions against its people that he believed to be inconsistent with Church doctrine. In El Salvador, the majority of Bishops did not embrace or preach Romero's message. As Romero increased these kinds of impassioned pastoral critiques, particularly when aimed at El Salvador's ruling elite, a majority of Salvadoran Bishops made clear that the Archbishop did not do so with their agreement.

Less commonly known, Mons. Romero also spoke out against human mistreatment of the natural environment, utilizing his pulpit to call attention to El Salvador's worsening ecological conditions. In a June 3, 1979 homily, Romero sermonized:

It is shocking to hear that the air is corrupted, that there is no water, that there are regions in our capital where water flows for barely a few minutes and that sometimes there is nothing, that the water tables are drying up, that our mountains' picturesque rivers are disappearing. Man's alliance with God is not being fulfilled because man, the Lord of nature is instead becoming nature's exploiter (Carias, 2014).

Romero's condemnation of nature's exploitation, a betrayal of man's alliance with God, is consistent with Pope Francis' and the Salvadoran Church's twenty-first century pastoral messages on the environment and God's Creation. However, during Romero's time the global Catholic Church was in a nascent phase of what today is recognized as Catholic Social Teaching on the environment and Environmental Theology. Besides the few recorded statements from Romero, the Salvadoran Church at that time does not appear to have taken on ecological issues.

Romero's immediate successor Mons. Arturo Rivas y Damas, who served as archbishop from 1983 to 1994, also presided over a Bishops Conference that was visibly split between its traditional and reformist wings, with the traditionally-oriented Bishops in the majority. Throughout his career, Rivas y Damas had practiced a more progressive revisionist theology than Romero's, prior to the latter's spiritual transformation. However, in the aftermath of Romero's assassination, and given the deepening civil war, Rivas y Damas was forced to proceed delicately when addressing controversial social issues. He is credited with continuing Romero's pastoral denunciation of injustice, while acting far more judiciously with his critiques of those in power. In the context of the political and social crises that dominated both Romero and Rivas y Damas' tenures as archbishop, El Salvador's environmental vulnerability was not prioritized. This would change under the leadership of successor Archbishop Mons. Fernando Sáenz Lacalle (who served from 1996 to 2009).

During the twenty-five year period that Mons. Rivas y Damas and then Mons. Sáenz Lacalle served as El Salvador's archbishop, the environment gained new prominence, with renewed emphasis on the Catholic tradition of Care for Creation and Stewardship of the Earth. Pope John Paul II, whose papacy spanned the

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archbishops of both Mons. Rivas y Damas and Sáenz Lacalle, was pivotal in bringing ecological concerns to the forefront of Catholic Teaching. In *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility*, December 8, 1989 he declared:

Faced with the widespread destruction of the environment, people everywhere are coming to understand that we cannot continue to use the goods of the earth as we have in the past...[A] new ecological awareness is beginning to emerge...The ecological crisis is a moral issue.

In 1990 Pope John Paul II contributed the first papal document dedicated entirely to ecology with his World Day of Peace message, "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation." He asserted:

There is a growing awareness that world peace is threatened not only by the arms race, regional conflict, and injustices among people and nations, but also by a lack of due respect for nature, by the plundering of natural resources which leads to a progressive decline in the quality of life.

These are just two examples of Pope John Paul's contribution to Catholic guidance on ecology that set a new ecologically-focused mandate requiring people to not just revere "God's Creation," but instead to actively care for, protect, and nurture the earth and the natural resources it contains. These papal messages emphasized that God's gifts of the earth's natural resources, particularly the life sustaining resource of water, must be available to all and not a select few. In a message to the Bishops of Brazil in 2004, Pope John Paul II wrote, "As a gift from God, water is a vital element essential to survival; thus, everyone has a right to it." In 2006, Pope Benedict XVI built on the foundation set out by his predecessor, "Water is much more than just a basic human need. It is an essential, irreplaceable element to ensuring the continuance of life."

Mons. Sáenz Lacalle ascended to Archbishop in the midst of this evolving Catholic perspective on ecology. Sáenz Lacalle's profile sharply contrasted with Romero and Rivas y Damas. He was openly politically conservative, an adherent of the traditionalist Opus Dei Catholic movement. While acknowledging that the Church had a responsibility to speak on behalf of the poor and disadvantaged, the Archbishop claimed it was not appropriate to engage in activism or politics on their behalf. Yet any understanding of Sáenz Lacalle would be incomplete were we to stop there. The Archbishop had also been trained as a chemist, having received a Master's of Science in his native Spain. Therefore, El Salvador found itself with a scientist archbishop at the same moment that the ecological principles of the global Catholic Church were evolving.

El Salvador's Turn against Mining

El Salvador's current rejection of gold mining is far from the predicted path for this small nation. As in most Central American countries, El Salvador had hosted a marginal mining industry since the late nineteenth century, but it had never amounted to a significant source of national income. Commercial mining all but disappeared in Central America during the 1980s, when the isthmus was rocked by crisis and war. El Salvador's civil war of 1980-92, combined with meager demand for gold in the global market, made El Salvador unattractive for metals mining investment.⁹ Following the peace accords that ended the war, the post-war government embraced mining as a promising vehicle to bring about much needed economic growth for the war-torn nation. Throughout the 1990s, consecutive governments implemented legal and regulatory reforms to facilitate the entry of foreign firms and promote the nascent industry. This included passing a revised mining law in 1996 and further amendments in 2001 that lengthened mining license terms and reduced government royalties and taxes (Reyes, 2011).

In 1998 Salvadoran environmental activists fought for and achieved passage of the country's first Environmental Law, which established the Ministry of Environment (World Bank, 2006). Yet developing a system of environmental governance did not derail the country's pro-extractives economic strategy, which persisted through the 1990s and into the new millennium. In 2002 gold's value began its steady climb, eventually doubling in value to \$600 per ounce in 2006. This would be just a third of the value it would eventually achieve in the ensuing years. Encouraged by international donors and creditors, a pro-extraction trajectory in El Salvador seemed to be a foregone conclusion.

El Salvador's journey to an industrial mining freeze began with the actions of affected citizens, from provinces possessing gold resources, who came to believe that their country was not suitable for metals mining. The World Bank and other international authorities have officially recognized El Salvador as the most environmentally degraded and densely populated country in Central America (UNDP, 2011). In the Western Hemisphere, only Haiti surpasses El Salvador in terms of deforestation (GFDRR, 2011). Although Salvadorans were not necessarily aware of their country's international environmental rankings, they experienced first-hand the challenges of maintaining their livelihoods in circumstances of such extreme environmental degradation.

Of the seven provinces along El Salvador's stretch of Central America's gold belt, Cabañas (a politically conservative stronghold) and Chalatenango (a bastion of the left-wing FMLN party and the focal point of the opposition during the civil war), have led the fight against industrial metals mining. Community groups from these

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⁹ During this period gold's value stayed year after year at around \$300 an ounce or less.

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areas joined with national level environment, policy-focused, religious, and research organizations based in San Salvador to transform “local concerns into a sophisticated, organized civil-society opposition to mining based on its environmental and social costs and lack of long term economic benefits” (Broad and Cavanagh, 2015a). In 2005 a number of these organizations from Cabañas, Chalatenango, and San Salvador came together and formed La Mesa Frente a la Minería, the National Roundtable against Mining. La Mesa has become the most prominent representative of the mining opposition. The diverse groups that comprise La Mesa are united by their insistence on a permanent legal prohibition of mining in El Salvador and the end of operations of mines in neighboring countries that could harm Salvadoran territory. As community leader and La Mesa co-founder Antonio Pacheco explained,

The problem for us in El Salvador [with mining] is not whether the community benefits. It would not matter if a company promised that 100% of the profits would stay in El Salvador. Mining “benefits” do not take into account the damage they cause at social, economic and environmental levels. So we cannot allow it (Pacheco, 2013).

Pacheco's statement is in line with La Mesa's main message: regardless of gold mining's promised economic benefits, El Salvador's level of environmental vulnerability and densely populated territory leave the country with no geographic flexibility to introduce a physically destructive industry like mining without directly harming the population. Reinforcing this point, La Mesa coordinator Rodolfo Calles, also former director of the social office for Caritas-El Salvador,¹⁰ shared his personal explanation for why El Salvador is different than other countries.

Take Chile for example. Chile can screw up half its territory and then live in the other half, and in fact live well with what they can get... In Lima, Peru's capital, they don't live the damages of mining in the country's north, in Cajamarca, and they have the luxury of moving people [as they need to] and improving the quality of life of those people even if they have messed up their territory. Here in El Salvador if we screw half our land we have already screwed over the other half (Calles, 2014).

While locally led and locally backed, the anti-mining movement also counted on strategic international partners that endorsed the position that El Salvador's precarious environmental conditions make it unsuitable for a metals mining industry. Initial international support came from groups that had longstanding solidarity relationships with the Salvadoran populace, rooted in the civil war. Andrés McKinley, an American who has spent decades living in El Salvador, became one of the first international partners of the locally led movement while working for Oxfam America. He cited El Salvador's extreme environmental vulnerability as the motivation for

¹⁰ Caritas is the Catholic Church's official international relief, development, and social service agency.

many international partners of the national anti-mining movement: “We don’t need to think in terms of mineral extraction in all parts of the world, under any/all conditions...there are areas of our planet that are simply not acceptable, not suitable, for extractive industries” (McKinley, 2014).

This message about El Salvador’s particular incompatibility with industrial mining is one that has resonated with Salvadorans who would not otherwise consider themselves to be anti-mining or readily adopt the left-wing politics of the organizations leading the Salvadoran anti-mining movement. For example, Arena senator Carlos Reyes, who represents the Gold Belt province of Cabañas and is recognized for his staunch conservative credentials, acknowledged, “For us the problem is that we have a tiny country and having a tiny country means that in some way or another wherever one starts a mining project there are also going to be homes and this makes things really complicated for us” (Reyes, 2014).

Beyond the issues of size, population density, and environmental vulnerability, El Salvador faces significant water-related challenges. This is exacerbated by the country’s dependence on a single water source that shares territory with mineral riches. Thus, water has become the central issue in the fight against mining, because of the risks of extreme contamination and of the depletion of existing sources, given the intensive water needs of mining operations. Most of El Salvador’s gold deposits are located in the country’s northern corridor. This is “the hydraulic heart of the country,” in the words of Sandra de Barraza, appointed to three Arena administrations from 1994 to 2009. Declaring that mining concerns in her country could not be categorized as simply a left-wing issue, de Barraza explained: “Anyone should be able to understand the people’s concerns about mining in El Salvador when you look at a map” (de Barraza, 2014). What a map reveals is that the same territory that encompasses the bulk of the country’s underground minerals contains the Lempa river basin, the primary source of more than half of El Salvador’s fresh water. The anti-mining movement strategically highlighted the dangers mining pose to water sources, most importantly the potential contamination from chemicals utilized in mineral extraction, like cyanide, and the heavy water usage in daily mining operations. Focusing on the need to protect precious water sources meant that the anti-mining movement could strategically frame their cause as “pro-water” rather than as “anti-industry” (Broad and Cavanagh, 2015b). This strategic emphasis on metals mining’s negative impact on the nation’s water sources has been credited as an important factor in convincing a majority of Salvadorans that mining would be more detrimental than beneficial for the nation.

The success of the anti-mining movement in reaching a broad cross-section of Salvadoran society was not just a result of the message, but also of how it was disseminated. A crucial component of this strategy was the facilitation of “information exchanges.” These were organized tours to historic mining sites within El Salvador and to active mines in neighboring Honduras, Guatemala, and Costa Rica that

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demonstrated the adverse effects of corporate mining operations, including severe water and land contamination (Pereria, 2014; Broad and Cavanagh, 2015b). In the Salvadoran province of San Sebastián, where corporate mining had taken place as recently as the 1990s, the San Sebastián River provided powerful visual proof of the severe contamination of water sources caused by metals mining.

In 2006, La Mesa scaled up its awareness-building efforts by partnering with Oxfam America to organize a "Week against Mining" that included carefully organized protests and educational events hosted across the country. It began with a march from Chalatenango, along the border with Honduras, to the capital, San Salvador, to deliver a community letter opposing mining to the Minister of Economy. These dramatic actions, covered extensively by the media, built national awareness of the potentially devastating impact on water sources.

Members of El Salvador's business community also recognized the perils that mining would pose to their country's water sources. Water, of course, is not just crucial for communities; it is also an essential resource for business. Therefore water source contamination does not just pose risks to life, but also to private sector profit. The Murray Mesa family, at the top of El Salvador's storied thirteen-family oligarchy, has made much of its wealth from the business of bottling sodas and juices using El Salvador's fresh water resources. The family never publically connected its members, companies, or their charitable foundations to the anti-mining fight. However, Roberto Murray Mesa and the foundation he led at the time, FUNDEMAS, launched its own Lempa River protection campaign that coincided with the government's decision to stop approving mining permits (Hernández de Lario, 2014; CND, 2005).

By 2007, a large portion of the Salvadoran public had adopted the view that mining would be more detrimental than positive, both for their country and for their individual lives. La Mesa and Cabañas community leader Antonio Pacheco noted that "in recent times" he had experienced few, if any, other issues that united Salvadorans of the right and left like opposition to mining. He explained,

In the Cabañas province, ARENA dominates local government, dominates national elected office, the FMLN has little strength. But here in Cabañas, almost 70% of the population are against mining. The people see their survival threatened and from this point of view it does not matter what political party or ideology you belong to (Pacheco, 2014).

According to a 2007 survey conducted by the Central American University (UCA), across the twenty-four municipalities for which the government had previously granted mining permits, 62.5% of those polled believed that the country did not have suitable conditions for mining (IUDOP, 2007). New polling data released in July of 2015 showed that public rejection of mining has continued to grow. 79.5% responded that El Salvador lacks suitable conditions for mining, and 77% agreed

that El Salvador should permanently prohibit mining (IUDOP, 2015).

Many among those active in the anti-mining movement openly credit the Catholic Church's embrace of the anti-mining/pro-water stance as depoliticizing El Salvador's mining opposition and enabling the message to reach across political affiliations and ideology. As Caritas' current director, Antonio Baños, explained: "The Church's position was important in the sense that it clarified for the population that [being against mining] wasn't a political position, wasn't a political issue – but an issue of human and environmental consequences" (Baños, 2014). Thus, by adopting the call of the community movement, acting with a united Church voice, and foregrounding the risks of this type of economic development to all Salvadorans, the Church reframed what it meant to follow an anti-mining/pro-water philosophy. Once the hierarchy unanimously embraced the same objections to metals mining as the community-based movement, the cause gained a new level of credibility. This helped to transform the profile of the mining opposition. The Church's public stance enabled the movement to expand its support far beyond its left-wing base in a way that became a real challenge to the mining industry.

The Salvadoran Catholic Church and Metals Mining

First Stage: The Early Years

From its inception, the community-based anti-mining movement in El Salvador included crucial support from "elements" of the Catholic Church, primarily individual clergy and socially-focused Church organizations. This early and consistent involvement was critical for ultimately securing the Church hierarchy's opposition to mining in El Salvador. It is unlikely, especially in an environment where direct political engagement was discouraged, that the Church hierarchy would have taken the steps it did without the support and participation of sectors within the institution. Therefore, it is important to understand the impact of the early years of Church involvement before the entire hierarchy took up the cause.

The most active and influential Church actors who provided early accompaniment to the anti-mining effort were Caritas-El Salvador, JPIC (Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation) El Salvador¹¹ – which became founding members of La Mesa – and the Diocese of Chalatenango under the leadership of Bishop Eduardo Alas. The primary precipitants of their involvement were requests from Salvadorans in the affected areas to help them gain an objective understanding of the impact of metals mining on their communities. As community groups began to come together informally to better determine how to confront foreign mining companies, they sought out individuals and institutions with greater power and influence than they had on

¹¹ JPIC represents the Franciscan branch of Catholicism.

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Like the Salvadoran community organizations mobilizing around this issue, participating elements of the Church gained foundational knowledge via exchanges with their counterparts abroad. They realized they could learn from the experience of countries where the mining industry was also relatively new but had already advanced farther than in El Salvador.

their own. The Catholic Church embodied those characteristics.

Caritas, with its mission to promote “advocacy on issues such as access to water, climate change, dam construction, mining, health, and prisons in El Salvador” (Caritas, 2015), was a logical ally. Community activists made connections with Caritas staff before reaching out to the religious leadership. Caritas staff member Dagoberto Cabrera, explained that Caritas-El Salvador first became involved:

...following an invitation by communities. We began in 2004, assisting in La Mesa’s first meetings and it was there that we realized that it was the people and organizations of Cabañas who were at the forefront of asking for our help. And then we remained involved. We began to look into and learn about mining, something that at the time we knew little about, starting by consulting with friends in neighboring countries (Cabrera, 2014).

Like the Salvadoran community organizations mobilizing around this issue, participating elements of the Church gained foundational knowledge via exchanges with their counterparts abroad. They realized they could learn from the experience of countries where the mining industry was also relatively new but had already advanced farther than in El Salvador. These “friends in neighboring countries” included Catholic clergy, members of those nation’s Church hierarchies, such as the outspoken anti-mining activist and Guatemalan Bishop Mons. Rammazini, and organizations like Caritas-Guatemala.

The anti-mining movement found an anti-mining champion within the upper echelon of the Salvadoran Church. In 2005 Mons. Eduardo Alas served both as Bishop of Chalatenango (and was, therefore, a member of the National Bishop’s Conference) and President of Caritas-El Salvador. The anti-mining movement reached him through both of his Church leadership positions. Born and raised in Chalatenango, Mons. Alas carried more than pastoral responsibility for the people of his diocese. Friar Domingo Solis (2014) of JPIC-El Salvador explained that Mons. Alas also “felt an innate connection to the land there.” As a result, when the Canadian joint venture between Au Martinique Silver Inc. and Intrepid Minerals Corporation began exploration activities to determine mining feasibility in Chalatenango, the region’s well-organized civil society groups reacted and so did the Bishop.

Baños explained that the Church’s support for Cabañas and Chalatenango community activism were reinforced by Bishop Alas’ relationship and connection to both:

I think it’s important to say yes, [the first to draw us in] were the communities of Cabañas because there was already a project at an advanced status there. But there were also communities of Chalatenango [who began to become active] and with the clergy of Chalatenango, they were well aware

of the problems. This is where the position of Monsignor Eduardo Alas contributes. In his capacity as president of Caritas he had all of the information from the work we were doing, from the studies we [at Caritas] were conducting and as well, because of his capacity as bishop of Chalatenango. Beyond that, he built his involvement as a result of his personal relationship with involved priests and also with affected communities.

Au Martinique Silver/Intrepid Minerals' general manager for El Salvador at that time, Robert Johansing, had worked with several other mining firms across the country before launching the efforts in Chalatenango. He admitted that initially he did not realize that this province had been ground zero for the opposition during the civil war (Johansing, 2014). For this reason, the province already had a well-organized network of civil society actors capable of effective coordination around issues it supported or opposed. Johansing noted that to procure community-buy-in, the project did not just need to pursue the appropriate legal channels with the government but also develop what he called a "social license" with communities. Faced with community backlash to their exploration efforts, Au Martinique Silver/Intrepid Minerals believed that if it could enlist the public backing of the Chalatenango Diocese it could develop a social license and build community support for mining.

Internal mining company documents from July 2005-2006 laid out a comprehensive strategy to successfully launch operations. These records, which include transcripts from community meetings, show that Bishop Alas and staff of the Chalatenango branch of Caritas were regular participants in meetings between communities and the company. In its strategy documents, the company laid out how it had identified "the opposition to mineral exploration in Las Flores, Chalatenango, and El Salvador" and its "understanding of the current players and issues and their potential roles in gaining the Social License" that would enable the company to operate. The Catholic Church, specifically the Chalatenango Diocese, was at the top of the list of key "players" (Au Martinique Silver/Intrepid Minerals, 2005-06).

Other internal company documents, dating from when the government granted the company its first exploration permit in July 2005, recorded meetings with the Bishop and other Church staff, including those from the local Chalatenango branch of Caritas. These records describe the Bishop as a relatively impartial participant in these discussions, intentionally refraining from overtly picking a side and always insisting upon the need to have all information before taking action. Seeing the Bishop as a possible and crucial ally, an intra-agency memo from March 2, 2006 explained:

The Church's highest authority in Chalatenango is the Bishop and is widely respected... The opposition to mining and exploration is led by some Catholic Clergy with strong socio-political power and organization. They consider their authority as autonomous, legitimate and above the Law. This legitimacy has been gained by the Church's defense of "people's life and dignity" since the end of the war. Numerous approaches have been

By 2007, three years after the community opposition to mining had begun to mobilize publically, two years after La Mesa became a legal entity, and one year after Mons. Alas' public statement on mining on behalf of his Diocese, the Bishops Conference lent its unified voice to the debate

considered for the resolution of our project's opposition. On the basis of social characteristics and sources of the opposition, it has been decided to implement the strategy that focuses upon the Catholic Church owing to their high credibility among the people and a certain degree of respect from the formal opposition to exploration and mining. From the beginning, Bishop Alas of Chalatenango has manifested the Church's willingness to learn about the positive and negative impacts that mining could have on the proximal [sic] communities (Au Martinique Silver/Intrepid Minerals, 2006).

By March 2, 2006, Au Martinique Silver/Intrepid Minerals joint venture had already faced substantial community resistance to its efforts to start mining exploration. Encountering obstacles to its goals, the project identified the Church as a source of support. As the quoted passage makes clear, the Church had become the focal point because of its high public credibility and the respect it commanded among the organized anti-mining movement. Bishop Alas appeared to be a potential ally because of his apparent willingness to listen to all sides in the conflict.

Mons. Alas had appeared impartial in 2005, but this was no longer true in 2006. On January 13, 2006, Mons. Alas became the highest ranking member of the Catholic Church to come out publically against mining. This foreshadowed the eventual position of the full Bishops Conference. At a ceremony to commemorate the feast of St. Hilary in Amayo, Chalatenango, Mons. Alas delivered a prepared public statement on behalf of the Chalatenango Diocese, subsequently published with the title, "Chalatenango Diocese: Mining in the Department of Chalatenango and Other Zones" (Alas, 2006). The statement was lengthy and tackled concerns related both to metals mining and dam megaprojects. In it the Bishop did not make reference to biblical narratives nor did he discuss specifics about environmental harms, such as land and water contamination. Instead, his critique focused more broadly, but repeatedly, on "the conditions of life" and "human dignity" that he argued would be adversely affected by such projects. The document also included a substantial preamble, clarifying that politics had no influence on his stance. Mons. Alas was clear and firm in his conclusion: "This Diocese believes and maintains that the dam megaproject Cimarrón and metals mining in our department does not benefit our people/community. Because of this we do not provide our backing or support" (Alas, 2006).

Second Stage: Scientist Archbishop Sáenz Lacalle

By 2007, three years after the community opposition to mining had begun to mobilize publically, two years after La Mesa became a legal entity, and one year after Mons. Alas' public statement on mining on behalf of his diocese, the Bishops Conference lent its unified voice to the debate. The pastoral letter did not simply represent an individual parish, priest,

Bishop or church organization, but rather a now unified Church hierarchy's public opposition to mining in El Salvador.

As Antonio Baños explained it, "The coup de grace happened when Mons. Alas passed on his position to Archbishop Saenz" (Baños, 2014). Bishop Alas, as one of the eleven current members of the national Bishops Conference, clearly had unparalleled access to the other members of the national hierarchy. But, given the history of poor cooperation among these religious leaders and a lack of unanimity in the Conference, it was not at all assured that Mons. Alas could convince the other Bishops of his anti-mining position. His efforts to do so were strengthened by the Salvadoran Bishops Conference's participation in regional and hemispheric organizations, including the Bishops Conference of Central American (CEDAC) and the Bishops Conference of Latin America (CELAM), which gave the Bishops from El Salvador the opportunity to tour mining sites and see the impacts for themselves. They refer to these regional exchange experiences in the 2007 pastoral letter:

From this perspective of faith we want to share with you our pastoral vision of a problem that concerns us deeply: the possibility that metals mining will be authorized, both open pit and subterranean, above all in the north of our country. The lived experience of our neighboring, sister countries, which have allowed mining of gold and silver, is truly sad and unfortunate. The bishops of those nations have raised their voices. We also want to speak out, before it is too late (CEDES, 2007).

This *comunicado*, and subsequent statements by the Archbishop and other Bishops, openly credited Church leaders from "neighboring, sister countries" for helping to bring them to this position (Slack, 2009). Thus, the Salvadoran Bishops made clear that their statement did not stake out new or unfamiliar ground by taking an anti-mining position. Yet El Salvador's national Catholic Church united against the mining industry in a way no other Bishops Conference from any Latin American country ever had done.

One of the major factors was the particular education and knowledge of the Church leadership in El Salvador. Ultimately the Church position did not rely only on theology, but on science as well. As previously noted, Sáenz Lacalle's support for the opposition to mining can be directly linked to his education in chemistry. This scientific training enabled him to assess mining company claims about the safety of the chemical and technological features of mining, including "cyanide evaporation" and the detoxification processes associated with "green mining" (Spalding, 2014). As Antonio Baños explained: "Archbishop Sáenz Lacalle was neither a person opposed to investment, nor could you consider him a Bishop aligned with the Left – he was adamantly Opus Dei. But he realized immediately, given his background as a chemist, that [the company] was lying to him." Andrés McKinley provided further insight into the Archbishop's thinking:

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Thus, explicitly and implicitly, the Church's integration of science with religion was foundational in making their case against mining and influencing the Salvadoran public and government.

When I was with Oxfam, we were very focused on the Church, educating the Church. I gave talks to the Conferencia Episcopal [Bishops Conference]. I gave a talk on mining to priests and nuns... One thing that I saw very quickly, Sáenz, politically speaking he is very conservative. But [he] understood the threat of mining, especially in terms of the use of cyanide. When we began to talk to him about the impacts of cyanide – I mean he knows, he is a chemist. We didn't know this when we started talking to him. But he picked up on cyanide right away, and that was the issue for him. Those of us who have been working on this issue for years and years understand a little bit better some of the other elements, components or threats around mining. What he understood was cyanide (McKinley, 2014).

The pastoral letter's approach to arguing against cyanide and water contamination was notably scientific and data-driven and not theological. It asserts,

People suffer severe health problems principally because of the use of large quantities of cyanide to extract gold and silver... the water that is used in the process of extracting these minerals is inevitably contaminated, initiating an irreversible process that contaminates ground waters and rivers, and then little by little would encompass the greater part of the national territory (CEDES, 2007).

While making no theological claims about cyanide or water, the mention of water's inevitable contamination by mining lays bare the betrayal of water, which in scripture "is a symbol of "purification" (Ps. 51:4; Jn. 13:8) and life (Jn. 3:5; Gal. 3:27).

Thus, explicitly and implicitly, the Church's integration of science with religion was foundational in making their case against mining and influencing the Salvadoran public and government. The Bishops Conference's 2007 letter states: "We know that the government has publicly stated its decision not to authorize this kind of exploitation. As pastors at the service of the Salvadoran people, we support that position." The message was strategic, given that at the moment of the release of their letter the government had only taken modest steps to slow the mining industry. The government "decision," as the *comunicado* acknowledged, was simply a public declaration. Not supported by legislation, it only served to put on hold, albeit indefinitely, the administrative processes for granting mining licenses. By formally identifying it as a firm "decision," the *comunicado* created a sense of accountability that would make it difficult for the government to back away from in the future.

As opposition to mining grew nationally, aided by the staunch support of the Church hierarchy, the multi-national companies investing in El Salvador struck back utilizing a variety of strategies. Anti-mining leaders believe these companies recruited and paid protesters to directly target the Church. However, companies such as the Canadian firm Pacific Rim, which had already moved beyond exploration to seeking an exploitation

license to start full extraction operations in San Isidro Cabañas, have explicitly denied any role in these weekly protests. Other strategies included confronting the opposition's messages through legal, political, and media channels. At least one of the companies has claimed that officials demanded bribes in exchange for the necessary mining permits. There is no formal documentation that any attempts at bribery took place. However, it did come to the public's attention that leaders within the industry, most notably non-Salvadorans from Pacific Rim, collaborated with political parties to draft a new law – ultimately never adopted – that would be more favorable to their industry.¹²

The international mining companies also took to the airwaves with their own message, directly speaking to ordinary Salvadorans. The goal appeared to be to influence elected officials by convincing the electorate. In 2008 El Salvador began to experience a media blitz intended to educate the public about “minería verde” – green mining. There was no clear sponsor of this effort – no single company added its name – but the multimillion dollar campaign saturated the airwaves. The media campaign also sought to utilize Catholic Church credibility, even if not through the official channels, by broadcasting on Central American University's radio. This campaign touted the benefits mining would bring to El Salvador, arguing that a pro-mining stance was a non-partisan position. In an attempt to attract the left wing support that so far had eluded those promoting mining, the ads highlighted the extractive industry in openly leftist countries, such as Cuba and Venezuela. The ads emphasized that mining could be done “sustainably” and that there would be many benefits for El Salvador similar to those in countries with political systems admired by many Salvadorans.

In response, Archbishop Sáenz Lacalle utilized scientific arguments along with theological principles to articulate the Church's position, discredit the mining industry's media blitz, and firmly oppose the use of cyanide in gold mining. In a 2008 interview with *El Diario de Hoy*, one of El Salvador's two leading newspapers recognized for its far-right political views, he primarily utilized scientific explanation to question the industry and state the Church's opposition to metals mining. Sáenz Lacalle called the industry's claim that cyanide can be transformed into a non-toxic substance “a myth that is unsubstantiated” (*El Diario de Hoy*, 2008). He continued by discussing the dire risks to El Salvador's limited water sources:

What is most troublesome is that these mines would be in the north of the country. All the water in El Salvador flows downward, from north to south. And even though the mines would be only in the north, the aquifers descend into the rest of the country. So we must consider this with caution.

¹² This law was submitted November 20, 2007 by the Partido de Conciliación Nacional (PCN), a small party with the reputation of being one of the most conservative and pro-business in the Salvadoran system.

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As the leadership of the Salvadoran Catholic Church embraced the pro-water/anti-mining mantle, the Church sectors that had first been involved in supporting the community struggle continued their action.

Sáenz Lacalle's water contamination arguments are similar to those employed by the community-based opposition and are consistent with the current pastoral messages promulgated by the Catholic Church.

As the leadership of the Salvadoran Catholic Church embraced the pro-water/anti-mining mantle, the Church sectors that had first been involved in supporting the community struggle continued their action. By 2008, Caritas-El Salvador and the Chalatenango Diocese had come under new leadership, Mons. Alas having retired in 2007. Bishop Luis Morao, who had first participated in the Bishops Conference as the incoming Bishop of Chalatenango and overlapped with Alas during his final months in charge of that Diocese, also signed the pastoral letter. When Mons. Morao became Bishop of Chalatenango and president of Caritas, he maintained his predecessor's position and continued the strategy of accompaniment. In July 2008 Caritas-El Salvador took action against the "green mining" media campaign and the attempt to pass a new mining law considered to be more favorable to international mining firms. In a letter to the legislature, signed by the Caritas leadership (which included Caritas vice-president, Bishop Bolaños) and the religious leadership of all the provincial country branches, Caritas expressed its concerns: "As the Pastoral Social arm of the Catholic Church we are profoundly worried by the media campaign and the strong pressure by mining companies to approve a mining law that threatens the environment and particularly our water resources" (Caritas, 2008). With this rhetoric, Caritas again focused on the need to oppose mining in order to protect El Salvador's fresh water sources.

The Caritas letter to the legislature recalled the Bishops Conference's 2007 *comunicado*, even as it also reached higher into the global Catholic hierarchy when citing evolving Catholic Social Teaching on the environment. The letter cites two of Popes Benedict XVI and John Paul II's most recognized ecological pronouncements:

Benedict XVI: "Water is an inalienable right" and an "essential and indispensable good that God has given man to maintain and develop life."

John Paul II: warning that to consider the environment a "commodity" is to put the environment, as our "home," at risk.

Matching Mons. Sáenz Lacalle's strategy, Caritas went beyond Catholic Social Teaching, precedent, and interpretation to provide justification for its opposition to the proposed mining law. It also presented scientific data and the long-established facts about El Salvador's "grave environmental problems" in order to bring home the point that "the efforts of the government and the population must be committed to environmental recuperation instead of promoting/pushing projects that put the region at greater risk" (Caritas, 2008). Following the scientific and religious evidence it set forth, Caritas requested that the assembly reject this bill.

Until he stepped down as Archbishop at the end of December 2008, Mons. Sáenz

Lacalle utilized the pulpit and post-mass press conferences to remind the public and government of the Church's stance on mining, emphasizing the evils of cyanide usage in the mining process. Just two weeks before ending his tenure, he utilized a press conference to oppose Pacific Rim's claim at the International Court for the Settlement of Investment Disputes (or ICSID, housed at the World Bank) that challenged El Salvador's right to deny the company a mining license. The Monsignor's words were explicit and biting: He explained that El Salvador could not justly risk the health of its people and the natural environment when the company planned to take 97% of the profits out of the country but leave behind 100% of the cyanide residue (Valencia, 2008). He reaffirmed support for the government's ongoing mining permit suspension and reminded his audience of the Church's anti-mining stance and 2007 *comunicado*. This appeared to give the Salvadoran government the Bishop Conference's blessing to defend itself against foreign pressure to mine.

It is difficult to determine the precise influence of the Catholic Church upon elected officials in El Salvador or to pinpoint which actions turned out to be the most impactful. There are some within the government who have openly denied the Church's influence. President Antonio Saca's Environment Minister Hugo Barrera – who oversaw the beginning of the permit freeze in 2006 – claimed that “no special interest group determined any decisions he or his party made” (Barrera, 2014). Yet, when President Saca finally chose to state his administration's intentions to suspend mining, as opposed to the more ambiguous critiques and questions he had offered in the past, he made the announcement during an interview on the country's leading Catholic radio station. Saca explained that his administration would not allow mining because of the dangers it posed and in fact “preferred to be forced into international arbitration and face those consequences” rather than allow mining (López Piche, 2009). Two years after the national Catholic Church had been unambiguous in its rejection of metals mining for El Salvador, the Salvadoran president utilized Catholic media to make the same case.

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Third Stage: Archbishop José Luis Escobar Alas, Words vs. Action

A change in leadership can mean a change in direction. However when Archbishop José Luis Escobar Alas¹³ succeeded Archbishop Sáenz Lacalle in 2009, the Catholic Church's stance on mining remained steadfast. Archbishop Escobar had the same conservative profile as his predecessor, and he implemented the Sáenz Lacalle doctrine of “words vs. action” more literally, forcing Caritas-El Salvador to withdraw as an official member of La Mesa while allowing Caritas to continue to support the cause with publications and other statements. Yet Escobar did utilize words – clearly and often – to establish the Church's position. This was apparent in one of his first Sunday homilies, just weeks before the first round in the presidential election. As reported in

¹³ No relation to Bishop Eduardo Alas.

El Salvador's political shift toward the left appeared to have no bearing on the Church's stance on mining.

the Salvadoran press, he stated:

In the most respectful manner, please permit me to make a vehement call to the current, honorable government of our republic and to the next government that will assume power the first of June, whatever party that it will be. I call on you to not permit the exploitation of precious metals or of silver in our country (Radio La Primerísima, 2009).

As reported, after prolonged applause he continued that the basis for this call to end mining was “the grave harm that it would cause to human, animal, and plant health, while contaminating, little by little in an expansive and permanent way, all our ground waters with cyanide.” Mons. Escobar’s announcement demonstrated that he and the Bishops Conference intended to uphold Mons. Sáenz Lacalle’s condemnation of cyanide use in mining processes.

Just as Archbishop Escobar Alas took over leadership of the Salvadoran Catholic Church, the Salvadoran government was undergoing its own leadership transition, which changed political ideology and direction for the country. Mauricio Funes, the candidate of the left-wing FMLN party won the presidency, carrying the FMLN to the highest position in the Salvadoran government for the first time in its history. Yet in terms of mining, the FMLN platform represented continuity. During his campaign and from the start of his presidency, Funes pledged to maintain the industrial mining suspension (Labrador, 2011).

The political shift toward the left appeared to have no bearing on the Church’s stance on mining. In November 2010, the Bishops Conference released a new *comunicado* on mining that once again spoke directly and briefly to Salvadoran legislators. Mons. Escobar Alas announced at a post-mass press conference that the Bishops’ anti-mining position had no political affiliation but instead served to promote the “common good.” Immediately linking this pronouncement to early Church statements against mining they opened by stating:

We, the Bishops of El Salvador, from a faith-based perspective and to ensure the common good, express today, one more time, our profound concern about precious metals mining utilizing cyanide that takes places in our country.

The letter then asserted that the “serious and irreversible” harms that cyanide contamination would cause to El Salvador’s “flora and fauna” made it imperative for the government to pass a “robust law” that would “prohibit gold and silver mining utilizing cyanide.” To build their case this time, the Church appeared to rely more on scientific and human welfare argumentation than theological justification. They omitted the kind of references to Church doctrine and pastoral contributions to Catholic Social Teaching that were included in the 2007 *comunicado*. They cited science to make their argument and turned to the law to protect their position. Yet,

the Bishops had not become secular. Having reminded their audience that they were repeating an argument they had made before “one more time,” they allowed this new pronouncement to build on earlier pastoral messages. The “flora and fauna” that cyanide in mining processes would devastate is part of the “home” that God has provided to humanity and, therefore, God’s followers have a religious obligation to protect it. “As pastors we raise our voices today because human life is in danger, the life and health of our people...No economic benefit justifies mining...nothing compares with the value of human life” (Rodríguez, 2010). As in 2007, the *comunicado* received support from all the country’s Bishops.

When asked why the Bishops Conference felt the need to release a second pronouncement, given their unanimous and unequivocal statement on mining in El Salvador just three years before, Bishop Rauda of San Vicente provided a clear explanation. While it had suspended granting permits for mining, the government still had not made any legal or regulatory changes to mining industry governance. This left open the possibility that at some point the industry could start again. Therefore the Conference deemed it important to reinforce their position, despite their already established consensus. Bishop Rauda explained, “It was a way of saying our position is clear, and yours too should be clear” (Rauda, 2014). In other words, the government’s actions were judged to have been not sufficiently decisive. While the permit freeze had managed to stop industry activities, the lack of legislative action left uncertainty for the future, which left the earth – as the home to all – in jeopardy.

In subsequent years, the Conference and the Archbishop used their pulpit – literally in the Church and before the media – to re-emphasize their position on the negative consequences of mining for El Salvador. From this platform, the Archbishop directed his comments beyond his country’s government and borders, to decision-makers in neighboring governments and to members of the international community. In June 2013, Archbishop Escobar demanded the closure of the Canadian company GoldCorp’s Guatemalan mine Cerro Blanco, putting his neighbors on notice and calling on the international community to add pressure (Swan, 2013). Located just across the El Salvador-Guatemala border on the Guatemalan side of the Lempa River, this mine would likely contaminate El Salvador’s fresh water resources. Just two months later, as his country was once again in the throes of the early round of the upcoming presidential election cycle, Archbishop Escobar directed his press conference statements to the candidates vying for office. While refraining from endorsing any candidate, he echoed his own words at the start of his tenure as Archbishop in 2009, demanding that, regardless of the electoral outcome, the new administration must uphold the de facto moratorium.

Conclusions

As Mons. Rauda explained, the Catholic Church’s leadership continues to encourage the Salvadoran people and government to take a more concrete stance against

The Catholic Church’s leadership continues to encourage the Salvadoran people and government to take a more concrete stance against mining because, although the de facto suspension has stopped the industry for now, the lack of decisive legislative action leaves room for a reversal.

Church support for the movement to oppose mining has gone beyond any particular individual or set of Church leaders. In contrast to other Latin American countries, where individual Bishops or entities within the Church took up the protest against mining, the Salvadoran Church has maintained a consistent anti-mining position under different leaders for almost a decade.

mining because, although the de facto suspension has stopped the industry for now, the lack of decisive legislative action leaves room for a reversal. This suspension is “de facto” because El Salvador’s Congress has yet to legislatively prohibit mining by passing a new law or amendment that might override, revise or limit the extant 1996 mining law. While the issue has been hotly debated, the legislature has never actually voted upon any of the several bills submitted. Those in opposition to all mining in the country – including Church leadership – still actively advocate a total mining prohibition inscribed in law. They fear the industry’s eventual return without such a legal mandate. Even without legislative certainty, support for the suspension of mining by three consecutive presidents has meant there continues to be no metals mining within El Salvador’s borders.

Yet, El Salvador is far from in the clear. The investor lawsuit criticized by Mons. Sáenz Lacalle in 2008 has yet to be resolved. Therefore, for almost as long as El Salvador’s mining industry has been paralyzed, the country has been embroiled in multi-million dollar lawsuits by foreign companies. El Salvador’s shrewd legal defense team, which has cost the country millions of dollars to maintain, managed to get one case thrown out. The other, however, carried forth by the Australian company Oceana Gold,¹⁴ is still pending. If the ICSID tribunal were to rule against El Salvador, the country would be responsible for a \$284 million penalty. Many believe Oceana Gold would try to use any legal victory as leverage to force El Salvador to eventually allow mining.

This ongoing uncertainty is one explanation of why El Salvador’s Catholic Church has persisted in its active opposition to mining. The Church’s continued interventions have influenced both public opinion and government policy. The Church’s moral standing, even among non-Catholics, has been an important source of its influence. Yet, three additional key factors have accounted for the Church’s effectiveness on this issue.

First, Church support for the movement to oppose mining has gone beyond any particular individual or set of Church leaders. In contrast to other Latin American countries, where individual Bishops or entities within the Church took up the protest against mining, the Salvadoran Church has maintained a consistent anti-mining position under different leaders for almost a decade. Although Bishop Eduardo Alas of Chalatenango paved the way, it is remarkable that the anti-mining stance was supported unanimously by the entire Bishops Conference. All the Bishops demonstrated public support for this position, even if the support itself was not uniform in passion or detail. The 2007 pronouncement demonstrated that the entire Salvadoran Catholic hierarchy, so often fractured in its positions, had united around the rejection of metals mining. It was important that two consecutive Archbishops utilized their role to broadcast this position. However, the full support of the entire upper echelon of the Church provided the anti-mining position with a level of moral clarity and certainty to which ordinary Salvadorans could relate.

¹⁴ Oceana Gold purchased the mining concessions in 2013 from the Canadian Company Pacific Rim that launched the suit.

Second, while recognizing that mining was a political issue, the Church's leadership sought to avoid addressing the politics, instead basing their stance on theological claims. Relying on biblical narrative and Catholic Social Teaching, the Church offered a religious foundation for why protecting the environment is a responsibility one has to God. Given that the Bishops Conference was led by a largely traditional and conservative Archbishop, one might not have expected it to unanimously embrace a cause publically championed by the political Left. Yet, the Church established an anti-mining position without aligning with any party or ideology, an approach that rendered the political orientation of other actors in the opposition less relevant. Furthermore, it avoided supporting any specific politician or party, emphasizing the duty of whoever might be elected to govern as well as other political leaders to follow the Church's guidance. Despite mining company efforts to politicize this issue, Church strategy appeared objective and, therefore, more palatable across otherwise highly divided and politically partisan Salvadoran society.

Finally, the Church did not rely on theological argument alone to support its position. The compelling facts of scientific evidence played an essential role. The unusual circumstances of Archbishop Sáenz Lacalle's scientific background helped to raise the profile of scientific fact as the Church formulated its pro-water/anti-mining position. While his knowledge as a chemist allowed the Archbishop to question the narratives offered by mining companies, none of the science the Church relied on contradicted its religious doctrine. Instead, science served to further support principles of faith, including the sanctity of God's creation, of which El Salvador's territory and water resources are just one, if an important part. Only then did they integrate scientific data to show how metals mining would exacerbate El Salvador's existing ecological vulnerabilities and threaten the ability of all Salvadorans to fulfill their Divine responsibilities. This is essential to recognize because in other public debates on contentious social and political issues, like women's reproductive rights or sexuality, science and religion are perceived to clash. Nevertheless, in the matter of metals mining in El Salvador, Catholicism and environmentalism have been mutually reinforcing. This has served to strengthen the Church's anti-mining position as well as the overall national opposition to mining.

The Catholic Church's steadfast commitment to keep industrial mining out of El Salvador is just one of the factors that led to the government's suspension of the industry and decision to favor protection of the country's natural resources over economic gain. Quantifying the extent of that influence in relation to others is impossible. The 2015 Paris Climate talks remind us of the power of the Catholic Church to lend influence to policy negotiations and decision-making, even at the global level. Catholic leaders and laymen have expressed their hope that "the guidance of 'Laudato Si' will provide the moral fiber" (Puet, 2015) in the negotiations that will allow leaders to make the difficult, but necessary decisions to make transformative agreements to protect the earth, God's creation. Anticipating the release of the Encyclical in 2014, El Salvador's Auxiliary Archbishop Mons. Rosa Chávez shared

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a similar hope about Pope Francis' impact, but in this case on the environmental sanctity of his country: "I hope that when the [Encyclical] comes out, we will have the backing of the highest authority of the Catholic Church that will then help us to defend life [in El Salvador] (Rosa Chávez, 2014).

If the Climate talks ultimately do reflect the messages from Pope Francis' Encyclical, clearly the Encyclical would only be one among many, political, social, and economic factors that influenced the results. The same must be acknowledged about the role of the Salvadoran Catholic Church in shaping its government's action on gold mining. Yet the outcome might have been different had the Church not weighed in or had only a fraction of the Church engaged this issue. Given the highly polarized context, had Catholic Church support been more muted, the anti-mining movement would likely have remained on the social margins. In that scenario, El Salvador may have followed the path of its neighbors by eventually adopting an extractive model for economic development. Instead, the vision of the Church hierarchy on this ecological issue and their accompaniment of the anti-mining movement have been crucial in allowing El Salvador to deny entry to the gold industry.

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